




Stephen Crane (front row, center) sits with teammates on the steps on the east side of the Hall of Languages in 1891. The "Old Row" trio (top left) consisted of the Hall of Languages, von Ranke Library, and Crouse College. Workers (top right) used horses to grade the "Old Oval," circa 1880s; the baseball field was located in this area, on the south side of today's Quad.



SYRACUSE AND A CIVIL WAR MASTERPIECE

*As an SU student, Stephen Crane was
more focused on baseball than studying,
but his time in Syracuse may have been
more influential to the writing of
The Red Badge of Courage
than previously thought*

BY RICK BURTON

THERE IS LITTLE INDICATION THAT WHEN STEPHEN Crane enrolled at Syracuse University in January 1891, a great American novel was percolating in his baseball-mad cranium. After all, it was still three years before he would publish his Civil War masterpiece, *The Red Badge of Courage*. Yet during his six months in Syracuse, Crane, an aspiring journalist born to a Methodist minister in Newark, New Jersey, was probably exposed to a series of sights, sounds, and sensitivities that would influence his future—and famously realistic—writing.

To properly set the stage, recall that he had flunked out of Lafayette College in Pennsylvania in December 1890 and needed the connections of his widowed mother, a niece to the Reverend Jesse Peck, one of SU's Methodist-Episcopalian founders, to get admitted to the relatively new—and still modest—university overlooking one of Onondaga's many sweeping vales. A member of the Class of 1894, Crane arrived that snowy winter of '91 at the Delta Upsilon fraternity house, located at 426 Ostrom Avenue near today's Thornden Park on the hilltop east of Marshall



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Street, and determinedly set his sights on playing varsity baseball for the Orangemen that spring. He signed up for English literature, history, and Latin classes, but acknowledged in a January 1896 letter to John Northern Hilliard, a journalist friend and author, that academia was not his forte. “I did little work in school, but confined my abilities, such as they were, to the diamond. Not that I disliked books, but the cut-and-dried curriculum of the college did not appeal to me. Humanity was a much more interesting study. When I ought to have been at recitations I was studying faces on the streets, and when I ought to have been studying my next day’s lessons I was watching the trains roll in and out of the Central Station.”

His Latin professor, Frank Smalley, later the dean of liberal arts, confirmed this sentiment in a letter to Crane’s widow in August 1900, noting that the author “devoted himself to athletic sports with ardor, especially base-ball and was our finest player.”

But Crane also had a passion for writing, whether it was fiction, journalism, or poetry. While his early work received modest praise, it was *The Red Badge of Courage* that would place Crane in the same breath with such noted literary

giants of the time as Mark Twain, Henry James, Jack London, and Edith Wharton.

The landmark novel was first published in serial form by the Bacheller-Johnson Newspaper Syndicate in December 1894. Nine months later, Appleton published *Red Badge*, and it was immediately apparent that Crane had captured the searing drama of the Civil War, which had ended 30 years earlier. Many Union and Confederate vet-

erans were still alive then and took to commenting on the accuracy of Crane’s battle scenes or debating which battle (unnamed in the book) might have served as Crane’s inspiration. Today, most literary historians believe the young author’s slight references to place and season suggest the bloody siege of Chancellorsville (April 30-May 6, 1863), which was fought across much of Spotsylvania County in Virginia. For his part, Crane told *Book Buyer* in 1896 that while working on his *Red Badge* manuscript, he’d been coaching and playing quarterback on a football team in Lakeview, a suburb of Paterson, New Jersey, and the experience influenced his writing. “I have never been in a battle, of course,” Crane said, “and I believe that I got my sense of the rage of conflict on the football field.”

However, new evidence, drawn from research at SU Library’s Special Collections Research Center and the University Archives, may reveal just how important Syracuse University, its geography, and baseball were to the creation of a book still selling more than a century after its release. In fact, in a November 1895 letter to the editor of *Leslie’s Weekly*, Crane wrote, “When I was at school, few of my studies interested me, and as a result I was a bad scholar.

In Crane’s day, the SU Hill featured the Hall of Languages (not pictured), von Ranke Library (now the Tolley Humanities Center), Holden Observatory, and Crouse College. A baseball (above) is among the Crane holdings in the Special Collections Research Center. It was donated by a Crane teammate and used in a game against Hobart College in which Crane played on May 23, 1891.



They used to say at Syracuse University, where, by the way, I didn't finish the course, that I was cut out to be a professional baseball player. And the truth of the matter is that I went there more to play baseball than to study."

And have fun. The 1891 *Onondagan* offers six distinct references to Crane, noting he not only played baseball and pledged DU, but also served as the alumni association secretary and treasurer of Claverack College, a quasi-military boarding school he attended from 1888-90. Crane also captained the DU cricket club, served as a member of the DU winter coasting club, and joined an eating group called the Toothpick Club.

What Crane saw in Syracuse in 1891 was, of course, completely different from the University today. There were only four buildings on Piety Hill at the time: the "Old Row" trio of the Hall of Languages (built in 1873), Crouse College (1889), and the von Ranke Library (1889; now the Tolley Humanities Center), as well as Holden Observatory (1887), which was relocated in 1991. The University began construction on a fifth building, the Women's Gymnasium/Y.M.C.A., in April 1891, but it was not finished until the next year and was demolished in 1965. The primary 50 acres donated to the University by George Comstock were still rolling farmland bordered by dirt roads and the densely forested Mount Olympus to the southeast and the Davis Estate (Thornden Park) to the northeast. The Quad, not yet hemmed in on three sides, stood largely as an undeveloped field with a baseball diamond carved out on the far south side.

Remember, too, that intercollegiate athletics, available only to men, were in their infancy, and the dominant sports at Syracuse were track and field (then known as "athletics"), football (which began formal competition in 1889), tennis, riflery, and baseball. The modern Olympic Games didn't exist until 1896, and the merger of baseball's National League and American Association didn't take place until 1901. Baseball was a rapidly growing sport nationally, and SU was famed for having won the 1888 state intercollegiate title.

Classes started that winter on January 6, and Crane attended his first baseball practice on February 2. He would have found it easy to look down on the emerging University



Crane, the war correspondent, traveled to Greece to cover the Greco-Turkish War in 1897.

and City of Syracuse from DU's commanding perch, and, as SU historian Freeman Galpin wrote, join his tobogganing frat brothers in racing "their sleds down Marshall Street to the 'meadows' on University Avenue." Before DU moved in, the hilltop residence belonged to Syracuse professor Wellesley Perry Coddington. Occupied today by the College of Human Ecology, the building features a plaque honoring Crane and still carries the Greek DU letters on the front cornice facing Ostrom Avenue, despite the fact DU is no longer an officially registered SU fraternity.

Fierce on the Field

On the baseball field, Crane was a 5-foot-6, 125-pound pepper pot of a player and one former teammate, a pitcher, described him as playing "with fiendish glee." Initially a catcher, he struggled with the long kneeling throw to second base when runners attempted to steal on him, so he became a shortstop. That season, Crane and his teammates benefited from the construction of a 50-seat baseball grandstand by George Shepherd (Class of 1891), the team's manager. The baseball diamond and outfield were just east of where Bowne Hall now stands—allowing Crane to enjoy an unimpeded sweeping view of his nascent "stadium" from Delta Upsilon.

To place baseball in a proper context for the impressionable Crane, who turned 19 that past November, we must recall the popularity of the sport had forced newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer to establish the first-ever dedicated sports department, in the *New York World*, in 1883. By 1889, baseball was a major player in the social conversation of the day. There were the national exploits of such players as Mike "King" Kelly and Cap Anson; the creation of popular songs, such as "Slide, Kelly, Slide" (1883), which emerged as America's first "pop hit" in 1889; and Ernest Thayer's poem "Casey at the Bat," which actor DeWolf Hopper began performing on vaudeville stages in 1889. Even Mark Twain referenced baseball. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), Twain's time-traveling hero, Hank Morgan, speaks of creating a nine-man team composed solely of kings. Twain saw the game as a powerful metaphor and commented in 1889 that "Baseball is the very symbol, the outward and visible

expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century."

Locally, the *Syracuse Daily Standard* recognized baseball's importance and frequently dedicated significant space in 1891 to the reportage of the Syracuse Stars, who played in the Eastern Association against the Albany Senators, Buffalo Bisons, Lebanon Cedars, New Haven Nutmegs, Providence Clamdiggers, Rochester Hop Bitters, and Troy Trojans.

Piety Hill's Influence

So the question is this: How might Syracuse University and baseball have shaped the writing of Crane's slender masterpiece? As noted above, we know football played its role in the novel's development, but we can suggest other influences. For instance, the opening sentences in *The Red Badge of Courage* could have been inspired by Crane's late-spring hilltop vantage point from the DU house: "The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting. As the landscape changed from brown to green, the army awakened, and began to tremble with eagerness at the noise of rumors. It cast its eyes upon the roads, which were growing from long troughs of liquid mud to proper thoroughfares."

This imagery is consistent with period photographs of Syracuse and fits the pastoral setting of a growing school designed as a Methodist-Episcopalian seminary, sitting on an undulating ridgeline overlooking Onondaga Lake. In fact, later in Chapter One of *Red Badge*, Crane uses imagery that might have sprung from the playing of Crouse College's chimes after Syracuse football games and at 5 each evening by the Delta Kappa Epsilon brothers. "One night, as he lay in bed, the winds had carried to him the clanging of the church bell as some enthusiast jerked the rope frantically to tell the twisted news of a great battle."

A few pages later, Crane's protagonist, Henry Fleming, prepares to leave his hometown to join the Union forces, and Crane's language invokes a warm—perhaps imagined—farewell from Syracuse: "From his home he had gone to the seminary to bid adieu to many schoolmates. They had thronged about him with wonder and admiration."

Later, however, Fleming runs from battle, deserting his unit in the face of a Confederate counterattack. This theme of desertion is significant in *Red Badge* and may have come from two moments in Crane's baseball career. The first took place during his time at Claverack, where he was offered the captaincy of the baseball team but turned down the honor. The second, and possibly more influential, occurred on June 6, 1891, when Crane's Orangemen traveled to Hamilton, New York, to play Colgate. By this

point in the season, Crane was Syracuse's shortstop; on this day, however, he was forced to play first base when two teammates failed to show up for the fray. "Syracuse was badly crippled by the fact that only seven of their regular players went to Hamilton," the *Syracuse Sunday Herald* reported the next day. "The shortstop had to play first base and the manager [Shepherd] had to play center field, one position being vacant." Additionally, the June 8, 1891 [Syracuse] *University News* reported, "Since we lost our chance for the pennant, the interest in base ball seems

to be entirely dead. At Hamilton on Friday, we lost a game to a team far inferior to ours, on account of this woeful lack of enthusiasm."

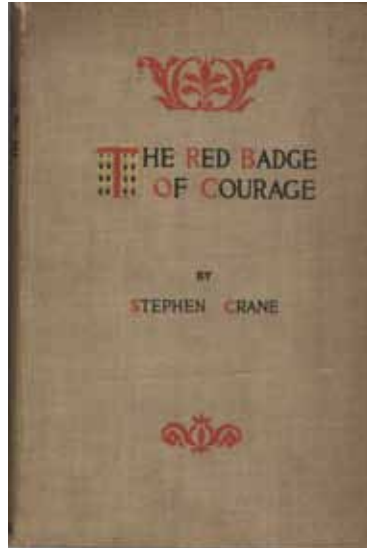
After the Road Trip

There can be no doubt that Crane would have been furious at teammates who failed to travel for his sacred game. When he returned to campus from Hamilton, Crane did little more than attend an official DU meeting on June 12 (his presence marked in attendance records), take his final exams (June 16-18), and enjoy the mild uproar his tongue-in-cheek article, "Great Bugs in Onondaga," had created for the *Syracuse Daily Standard* and the *New York Tribune* earlier that month. The humorous story—a fictional piece many historians have referred to as a hoax—told the tale of large bugs with "turtle-like armor" infesting the railroad tracks near a Jamesville limestone quarry and

interrupting train service to Syracuse. Before the month was over, Crane was gone, headed for New York City to further his skills as a journalist and aspiring novelist. But Crane's Syracuse memories stayed with him, and several times in *Red Badge* we can see hints of SU.

For example, in Chapter Seven, Henry Fleming enters a deeply wooded glade (possibly the oaks and pines of Mount Olympus), where "he threw a pine cone at a jovial squirrel, and he [the squirrel] ran with chattering fear." A page later, Crane wrote, "The youth went again to the deep thickets. The brushed branches made a noise that drowned the sounds of cannon. He walked on, going from obscurity into promises of a greater obscurity. At length he reached a place where the high, arching boughs made a chapel. He softly pushed the green doors aside and entered. Pine needles were a gentle brown carpet. There was a religious half light."

Crane also spiritually references a wooded setting at the beginning of Chapter Eight: "The trees began softly to sing a hymn of twilight. The sun sank until slanted bronze rays struck the forest. There was a lull in the noises of insects as if they had bowed their beaks and were making a devotional pause. There was silence save for the chanted chorus of the trees."



This 1899 edition of *The Red Badge of Courage* was recently acquired by the Special Collections Research Center. Its cover is the same as that of the first edition published in 1895.



Crane's mentor, John B. Van Petten, served under the command of Union General Edwin Vose Sumner, who is buried in Oakwood Cemetery, next to campus. Van Petten's influence on Crane may have prompted a visit to Sumner's mausoleum.

Oakwood Cemetery Connection

Given the nature of Syracuse's religious roots and the embryonic physical development of the campus, it is easy to imagine Crane's intense but rather religious narrative about the rural setting and insects could have been inspired, in part, during the spring of 1891. Walks through nearby Oakwood Cemetery, which was established in 1859, would have revealed a sizeable mortuary chapel and receiving vault, as well as many tranquil gravesites and mausoleums dedicated to Civil War veterans, including Union General Edwin Vose Sumner, the commander of the 2nd Corps of the Army of Potomac who died in Syracuse in 1863. And Crane would have recognized Sumner's name, because Crane's favorite teacher at Claverack was the "Reverend General" John B. Van Petten, who served under Sumner. According to historian Thomas O'Donnell, Van Petten was a chaplain in the 34th New York Volunteers (160th Regiment) who fought under Sumner at Fair Oaks and Antietam and later earned a Ph.D. in history at Syracuse University (1889) while regaling Crane with Civil War stories at Claverack. It seems likely that Van Petten would have visited the grave of his commanding officer during a trip to Syracuse, and told his war-loving student, Crane, that one of the Union's most noted generals was buried next to campus. In fact, historian Lyndon Pratt proposed in 1939 that "*The Red Badge of Courage* owes more to Van Petten than to any other single source of influence."

After leaving Syracuse, Crane wrote feverishly for various publications throughout 1892 and, under the pen name Johnston Smith, self-published his first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, around March 1893. Many believe that Crane based this realistic story of a girl from the slums on a local woman he met during his frequent forays into the Salt City. Crane's frat brothers later claimed that

early draft pages of *Maggie* were hidden in DU's attic. At the time, Syracuse was a thriving industrial town, built on the barge traffic that plied the Erie Canal and sustained in the 1890s by the New York Central Railroad. Such local merchants as Dey Brothers and Durston's Bookseller or the exotic Russian or Turkish baths at places like the Globe Hotel would have caught Crane's attention, and a trip downtown simply required pointing a bicycle westward and speeding downhill from DU.

It appears Crane never returned to Syracuse after publication of *Red Badge*. While he enjoyed notable success as an author and war correspondent, he also endured a scandal that suggested he was socializing in the company of prostitutes and even survived a ship wreck off the Florida coast. Venturing to Europe, he mingled with the likes of H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James before dying of tuberculosis at age 28 in Badenweiler, Germany. Wells called Crane "beyond dispute, the best writer of our generation." Likewise, there should be no disagreement that the young man—who loved baseball and rose to international fame with a book that continues to influence literary and cinematic discussions of cowardice and bravery in war—was touched by his time at the ever-expanding university on the hill.

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